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China 's Gitmo Refugees

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As a measure of Europe's true concern for the men held at Guantanamo, we offer the story of 15 Uighur inmates there. Captured in Afghanistan where they were for reasons that remain unclear, the men are not considered "enemy combatants" by the U.S. military, which wants to release them.

Only these Uighurs can't go home to China. Beijing brutally represses this Turkic-speaking Muslim minority of some 8 million that lives in the country's northwestern corner. The Chinese government considers any Uighur who wants independence a "terrorist," and these 15 Gitmo alums aren't likely to be welcomed back with open arms.

Washington is looking for a third country willing to grant these men sanctuary. Sweden, France, Germany, Finland, Norway, Switzerland and Turkey are, according to news reports, among the countries that have been approached. You'd think that Europe, so critical of U.S. detention policies, would jump at an opportunity to shrink the size of the prisoner pool at Gitmo. You'd be wrong. Not a single country offered to take them in.

Last Monday, the U.S. Supreme Court deferred an appeal by two of the Uighurs who want to be released in the U.S. to a lower court. If Washington's talks with "friendly" nations falter, asylum in the U.S. may be the only humane option available. America has provided shelter to the world's oppressed for centuries, and assuming these men are no threat, it could do so again. But the Uighurs are not America's problem alone. After all, they were picked up during the "good war" -- good in the sense that Europe supported it -- in Afghanistan.

Die Welt reported that the Bush Administration wants Berlin to accept the men since Germany already has a small Uighur community. Berlin rejected Washington's request because it didn't want to offend Beijing, according to the German daily. That's a fair guess as to why other countries kept their doors closed too. When we called the German government, their reply was a curt "no comment."

Chancellor Angela Merkel has done much to repair the diplomatic damage done by her predecessor Gerhard Schroeder. But even she found it necessary to open her first visit to Washington in January with a call for Guantanamo's closure. Ms. Merkel will be back in Washington next month, giving her an opportunity to show that she wasn't playing to the anti-American gallery. Reserving 15 extra seats for her flight back might do the trick.